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ABSTRACT

The primary goal of the program described in this paper was to develop activities to provide fifth graders with an opportunity to meet people in fields of work which are generally considered to be outside the child's everyday realm of experience. The career education unit visits by a folksinger, a weaver-dyer, a nurse, and an advertising manager and the arrangement of a six-and-a-half-day residency for a poet, who taught three classes a day and held daily workshops with teachers. Under the poet's direction, the children wrote poetry and compiled an anthology of their own works. Although funding was not obtained from the National Endowment for the Arts for a similar session for the following year, the school's Parent Teacher Association voted to match funds for another poet in residence. An evaluation of students' responses on questionnaires indicated that, although there was little change in pupils' career choices, the poet was ranked highest of all the guest speakers. (KS)

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Meet-The-Poet-At-His-Craft: Career Idea

Children and Poetry

Congers Elementary School is located in Rockland County, a suburban area, approximately forty-five minutes driving distance from the heart of New York City. Coming from largely white, middle-class homes, the pupil population consists of approximately 530 children in grades kindergarten through six. Parents work in a wide variety of fields and hold such positions as executives in large corporations, construction workers, telephone linesmen and owners of small businesses. Most of the teachers use a traditional style of teaching and place a heavy emphasis on reading and mathematics.

In December, 1973, when I was appointed to the position of principal at Congers Elementary School, the fifth grade classes were concluding a career education unit on journalism. Three teachers in the school had attended a series of district seminars on career education. As no further plans had been made by the district to continue this program, I decided to write a proposal

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to secure funds to continue the work begun in career education and to apply for a New York State Mini-Grant.

Launching The Program

After receiving the mini-grant for my proposal, Meet-The-Artist-At-His-Craft: Career Idea, I met with the teachers of the fifth grade to explain the purpose of the program and make plans for the selection of persons to be included. The teachers recommended a weaver-dyer and an ecological folksinger. While these people were being contacted, I was notified that I had been offered a matching grant from the New York State Poet-In-The-School-Program. As the mini-grant funds were nearly depleted, this was, to say the least, a serendipitious windfall.

The poet would work with three classes, in-residence, for six and one half days. As we had three fifth grade classes who had recently completed a unit on journalism, it was agreed that they would work with the poet. The objectives of the career education program were established for pupils and teachers as follows;

Objectives For Pupils

1. To broaden the children's awareness of career opportunities.
2. To bring children into one-to-one contact with persons in the fine arts and humanities.
3. To provide an opportunity for children to express their personal interests in career possibilities.
4. To develop an awareness of the library as a tool and a vehicle for extending their information regarding careers.

Objectives For Teachers

1. To participate in the selection of persons to participate in the career education program.
2. To meet with guest artists to draw plans for class or group lessons.
3. To implement plans for lessons and carry out follow-up procedures as required.
4. To gather data and evaluate the effectiveness of the program.

It was axiomatic that a program such as this would be difficult to evaluate as there would be no statistics nor any "yes" or "no" answers to give us any hard and fast data from which we could draw definitive conclusions. Unfortunately, at this time, we are unable to measure how much or how well someone has learned through "infusion" or how much more "aware" a pupil has become. Accepting these limitations, we launched our program.

In an attempt at evaluation, each child was given a questionnaire pre and post the program asking him to describe how he would like to live when he is grownup. Pupils were asked to tell about one day on which they would be going to work. The second question asked them to describe the second job they would choose should they be unable to have their first choice. The third and final question asked for a description of how they would spend their time relaxing after work.

From the first two questions one can see that the responses would be given in the form of a narrative description of the child's career; the final question would reveal any possible correlation between work and relaxation activities.

Purpose Of The Program

Briefly, the idea behind this program was to develop activities to provide fifth graders with an opportunity to meet persons in

fields of work which are considered to be, generally, not in the child's everyday realm of experience. The goal was to broaden the child's awareness of career possibilities. At the elementary school level children traditionally have been introduced to such workers as the policeman, fireman, postman, dentist, teacher and nurse as people in the world of work. We saw no reason for maintaining this limitation; and knowing that children at this age are very curious and eager to learn, we decided to launch the program. It was expected that the children would learn the career education concepts from indirect infusion rather than from direct teaching. No lectures would be given on career education. Instead, the visiting teachers would briefly tell how they came to be in their present field of work.

The Program

The director of the Poet-In-The-Schools program and the county coordinator worked out the details for setting up the residency. I interviewed the poet who was recommended and set up a schedule in which he would teach three classes a day and hold a daily workshop with teachers. He would also be responsible for selecting those poems which were to be included in the final anthology to be produced for the children and the school library. Each child who participated would receive a copy and thereby see his or her work in print.

The reason for including a poet in the career education program is self evident. How often has either one of us met, or worked with a poet? Not an everyday occurrence, to say the least. It was our hope that this experience would extend the children's ideas about poets, poetry, writing, learning and possibly careers.

The poet's purpose was more specific. He expressed the desire to convey to the children the concept that words and language are alive, that words can change and bend depending on how they are used. He wanted the children to develop a keener sense of their own feelings, to realize that there is in poetry color, emotions and ideas. He wanted to eradicate the notion that all poems must rhyme; and although he did not emphasize spelling or grammar, he maintains that as children begin to take pride in their own writing they comcomitantly become more concerned about correct grammar and spelling. He expressed the belief that children's self-respect is enhanced as a result of programs such as this and that children begin to develop a more valid view of the world. He felt that through their poetry the children create their own words, vocabularies and worlds. These were the ideas expressed by Bill Wertheim, our poet-in-residence, as he spoke to a staff writer who was interviewing us for a feature article in a local newspaper.

In a personable, warm, low-keyed manner, Wertheim skillfully led the children into writing poetry. His first lesson introduced them to the "I" in twentieth century American writing, emphasizing the fact that a poet must use his five senses keenly if he or she is to express his ideas and images clearly, succinctly and honestly. Relating to the poems he read to the children, such as D.H. Lawrence's "Trees In A Garden" and Emily Dickinson's "I Never Saw A Moor", Wertheim discussed the power of the use of simple language, breaking up lines of poetry and creating images.

The figure of a skeleton in one of the classrooms evoked a lesson about death. Wertheim wrote, "The discussion went from Halloween to skeletons-to fear of skeletons-to monsters-to dying: loss of something and/or someone we love. How it feels to die, how it feels to lose someone you care about." He indicated that first the topic was discussed aloud, then later on paper; and for those children who preferred an alternative topic, he suggested writing about

coming back to life. Wertheim said it was the most touching lesson he had ever taught and that some children cried. This led to a discussion about crying, trust and kindness; and he took this opportunity to express the idea that "Crying is OK, even for boys". He said that the children were kind and supportive of each other.

In subsequent lessons nature, photographs, dreams and music were used to stimulate the imagination. A wide variety of poems were written in response to music of Elizabethan dances, a string quartet of Shostakovich and a Japanese flute.

Hundreds of poems were written by the seventy-eight children who participated in the program and were reviewed by Wertheim and the teachers. A parent volunteer prepared the final draft of the manuscript of selected poems for the anthology. As Bill Wertheim made his last goodbyes, two fifth grade girls ran up and asked him to return to Congers school. They were sad to see him leave. After spending the past six days sharing their innermost feelings with him, it was difficult to let this new found poet-friend go.

Wertheim later described his work with the children in a letter to me saying, "They were alert, perceptive, intelligent, and sensitive and gave me much more feedback than I had expected. They would certainly benefit from continued creative projects, of whatever nature..."

His pupils, now in the sixth grade, have continued to write poetry, trying many new forms including sonnets, haiku, cinquain, and free verse, to name a few.

Prior to the poet's arrival, a fifth grade teacher attended a lecture-conference given by Kenneth Koch, author of "Wishes, Lies and Dreams" and noted for his work in the field of children's poetry writing. This teacher recommended his book; and I was able to secure a copy for each teacher, in preperation for the poet's residency. In addition, the school librarian and his assistant

prepared a poetry bibliography for each teacher.

During the following summer, copies of the anthology were collated, placed in the school library and sent to the poet and the director of the program. In the fall each child in the program received a copy.

Early in the fall I received a call from the director of the program asking if one of our pupils was still in the school, as she had been selected as one of four pupil-poets to represent New York State at a subcommittee hearing with Senator Peter Peyser in Washington. The purpose of the hearing was to seek refunding of this program through the National Endowment for the Arts and Humanities.

Ilka Shuman's parents were delighted with the news and proud to have her participate. Upon her return, Ilka told of her experience at a faculty meeting and later at an assembly program for the fifth and sixth grades. At that time she was presented with a certificate of merit for her outstanding work, now permanently recorded in The Congressional Record. At the faculty meeting, as Ilka spoke, her teachers beamed at her and were visibly touched by this twelve-year-old's intellect and poise - and perhaps not a little for their having had some small part in all of this.

During the winter, a former member of the Board of Education, and a published poet in her own right, offered to donate a copy of her poems to our school library. After the volume was formally presented to the president of the student council, the gesture was returned by presenting her with our anthology of children's poetry. She was thoroughly surprised and proud of our achievement.

This year, as there were no funds from a mini-grant, the Parent Teacher Association voted to match the funds for another poet-in-residence. Support for such a program is extremely significant as it represented a respect for the need for learning in the area of the arts and humanities. This year the poet is

Susie Mee. She too will spend a six and a half day residency teaching the writing of poetry, this time to three third grade classes. It is hoped that there will be a poet-in-residence at Congers every year.

Evaluation

As was previously mentioned, the pre and post questionnaires were so constructed as to evoke a response which would indicate the pupil's first and second choice of careers and to indicate how the pupils would spend their leisure time. The latter question was included to note if there was any correlation between career choice and leisure choice. A comparison between pre and post questionnaires might also reveal any changes in career choices as a result of class discussion about careers or from the emergence of a heightened awareness. An evaluation sheet including the names of each visitor was also distributed to each pupil.

In comparing the pre and post narrative responses to the questions, it was interesting to note that there was little or no change in the pupils' career choices. In a very few instances (6 out of 78) was there any correlation between the choice of work and the form of relaxation. The large majority of pupils included eating, drinking, watching television and sleeping (in that order) as their chosen forms of relaxation.

A random sampling of first and second choices for careers follows:

First Choice	Second Choice
ranch hand	horse rancher
architect	doctor
model	nurse
carpenter	electrician
teacher	secretary
female jockey	veterinarian
secretary	waitress
stewardess	waitress
stock car driver	hunting guide
vet	mother
artist	teacher
dental technician	architect
singer	teacher
football player	baseball player
beautician	waitress
assist old folks	clothing saleslady

The choices for careers covered a very wide spectrum and remained consistent when the same question was asked six months later.

Pupils were asked to evaluate each of the guest speakers: poet, folksinger, weaver-dyer, nurse and advertising manager. The three top choices were the poet, nurse, and advertising manager, in that order. In all fairness to the others, it must be re-stated that the poet had the advantage of a six and a half day residency with the pupils while the other visitors had only a single, forty-five minute lesson. The nurse and the advertising manager had the advantage of being well known to many of the pupils, as they were both parents of pupils in the fifth grade.

These factors must not be overlooked as it may have had a positive effect on the children's receptivity to them. Some of the pupils, never having heard of medieval music before, stated that the songs sung by the folksinger were "babyish". Some expressed a similar reaction to the weaver-dyer, but were very interested in the two-month-old baby lamb which she allowed each child to hold and pet.

Each of the seventy-eight pupils answered "yes" to a question asking if this career education program should be continued next year. When they were asked to suggest people that they would be interested in meeting - pop singers, athletes and astronauts headed the list.

It was suprising and pleasant to note that one pupil added a statement that a promise had been made to give each child the book of poems at the end of the program and that this had not been done. It was very reassuring to read that a child was looking forward to receiving the anthology that was in the process of being produced.

In the teachers' eveluations, the poet, weaver-dyer, and advertising manager were rated as the top three most effective visiting teachers. One teacher indicated that she would have preferred that the poet omit the lesson on death as she felt that it had had an adverse effect on some pupils. Two teachers indicated that they appreciated the opportunity to observe another teacher in action. Each teacher indicated that he felt the program was worthwhile and,as a result, a resource file of volunteer parents was established.

Parents supported the program; and during an executive board meeting of the Parent Teacher Association, one parent stated that she felt that death should not have been chosen as a topic for discussion. A lively discussion ensued and a number of mothers felt that no one had ever broached this subject when they were children. They felt that it was healthier

for the children to discuss death openly. The ultimate support for the program was expressed by the parents' unanimous vote to set aside funds for the matching grant to have a poet-in-residence teacher for three third grades in the spring.

Although it is difficult to assess whether or not the pupils are now more aware of a wider variety of careers, it was felt that there were so many other positive, obvious benefits which arose as a result of this program that it was considered successful and should be continued. In fact, this year we received a grant from the National Humanities Faculty for a two and one half day in-service teacher-training workshop in career education.

The enthusiastic response to the Poet-In-The-Schools program from the pupils, teachers, parents and community is what moved me to share our experience with others. When we began we did not expect to send a pupil to a Congressional hearing in Washington, nor the principal to the Sixth World Reading Congress in Singapore, nor did we expect to receive another grant from the National Humanities Faculty. Perhaps you would enjoy having a poet in residence at your school? Why not? As Byron so aptly put it "...for a man's reach should always exceed his grasp or what's a heaven for?"